# When the power shifts: Illegal immigration, gender dynamics, and mental illness in Mira T. Lee's Everything Here Is Beautiful

*Mira T. Lee's Everything Here is Beautiful (2018) chronicles the lives of two Chinese-American sisters, tracing protagonist Lucia's experiences with mental illness across different diasporic contexts. This article argues that the novel presents madness not as a purely individual or psychological condition, but as something produced at the intersection of immigration status, gender dynamics, and geography. Central to this argument is how the illegal status of Manny, an undocumented immigrant from Ecuador and Lucia's partner, fundamentally suppresses his sense of identity and masculinity — and how the reversal of this dynamic, when the couple relocates to Ecuador, has direct and damaging consequences for Lucia's mental health. In the US, Lucia's citizenship affords her independence and agency, while Manny's undocumented status neutralises the patriarchal power he might otherwise exercise, producing an unusual, if fragile, form of equality between them. When the couple relocates to Ecuador, these dynamics shift dramatically: freed from the threat of deportation, Manny reasserts his masculinity and reclaims authority, while Lucia loses her independence and sense of self. Drawing on theories of diaspora studies, gender studies, and masculinity studies, the article demonstrates how geography does not merely provide a backdrop for Lucia's illness but actively produces the conditions for it.*

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, madness, illegal immigration, gender dynamics, masculinity*

> He was back in his country, with his family. The work was hard but predictable. Air seemed to circulate more smoothly through his body, in one continuous loop, without getting stuck, or sucked in, or expelled in frantic bursts (Lee, 264).

In Mira T. Lee's *Everything Here is Beautiful* (2018), one of the two protagonists, Lucia, decides to move to Ecuador with her partner, Manny, and their daughter, Essy. Manny, who was an illegal immigrant in the United States, feels his freedom tangibly once he is back in his home country, where he no longer needs to fear the threat of deportation. However, as I will argue in this article, Manny's newly found freedom comes at the cost of Lucia's mental health. Drawing on her own diasporic experience as the child of first-generation Chinese immigrants — and having herself navigated the experience of living between Hong Kong and the US — Lee brings an intimate understanding of migration and cultural negotiation to the novel (A. Kim, n.p.). While reviewers have tended to classify *Everything Here is Beautiful* as popular fiction, with some criticising its multiple narrators and geographical jumps as 'laboured' and others comparing it to telenovelas, the novel has also been praised for capturing the reality of mental illness without dehumanising its protagonist (Gillenwater, n.p.). Despite its conventional structure, it rewards serious academic analysis for the ways in which it engages with the intersections of immigration, gender, and madness. The novel chronicles the lives of a Chinese migrant family consisting

of two sisters, Lucia and Miranda Bok, and their mother, who dies of lung cancer. Miranda and her mother moved to the US while the mother was pregnant with Lucia after their father had died in an alleged accident. Lucia is thus born a citizen of the US, unlike her immigrant sister, who also becomes a US citizen. This difference in birthplace shapes the sisters' opposite personalities: Miranda embodies the responsible, conservative Chinese daughter, while Lucia is free-spirited, exemplifying the freedom afforded to her as a citizen of the US. At the centre of the novel is Lucia's deteriorating mental health and its effects on both sisters' relationships — with each other and with their respective partners. While I will touch on the sibling dynamic, this paper focuses primarily on Lucia's relationship with Manny, and the ways in which his experiences with illegal immigration shape the gender relations between them. It is through this relationship that the novel resists easy categorisation of Lucia's madness, presenting it as fluid and contextual — shaped as much by her circumstances and relationships as by any internal psychological condition. Rather than a fixed clinical state, her madness is exacerbated or relieved by the geographical and gendered power shifts she navigates as a migrant woman. I argue that the novel presents madness not as a purely individual or psychological condition, but as something produced at the intersection of immigration status, gender dynamics, and geography. Central to this argument is how Manny's illegal status in the United States fundamentally suppresses his sense of identity and masculinity, and how the reversal of this dynamic, when the couple moves to Ecuador, has direct and damaging consequences for Lucia's mental health. In this article, I employ a close reading of Lee's *Everything Here Is Beautiful* alongside theories of diaspora studies, gender studies, and masculinity studies in order to illustrate the structural and geographical production of madness.

My analysis traces these inversions across two geographical contexts. In the US, Lucia's citizenship affords her independence and agency, while Manny's undocumented status renders him economically constrained and perpetually vulnerable to deportation. This shapes the balance of power in their relationship in ways that are particular to the diasporic context; Manny's illegality effectively neutralises the patriarchal power he might otherwise exercise, producing an unusual, if fragile, form of equality between them. Following their relocation to Ecuador, this balance shifts dramatically. Freed from the threat of deportation, Manny reasserts his masculinity and reclaims a sense of authority, while Lucia finds herself subject to the country's conservative gender expectations, resulting in a loss of independence and sense of self. I examine how this loss drives her mental deterioration in Ecuador and how it is only through a return to the US that she is able to reclaim her own agency. Through this analysis, the article illustrates the triangular connection between madness, gender, and diaspora in Lee's novel, demonstrating how geography does not merely provide a backdrop for Lucia's illness but actively produces the conditions for it. In so doing, I contribute to broader conversations about how women's mental health is shaped by displacement, legal status, and the gendered expectations that shift across national and cultural contexts.

*A note on 'madness'*

In my analysis of Lucia's mental deterioration, I use the term 'madness' due to the relatively undefined nature of her mental illness. While she may be diagnosed with different disorders at various points in the novel, no single diagnosis is clarified or confirmed, and thus the term 'madness' is used as an encompassing term for her various mental health struggles. My use of the term both registers and engages the problematics of its general usage. Colloquially, it can describe mental illness and questionable behaviour, while it also conveys the stigma attached to the various conditions which it indiscriminately encompasses. Peter Beresford argues that for many who have been institutionalised, the word carries fear and stigma, having been used against them rather than for them (3). Given these complexities of definition, usage, and experience, my literary critical reading of portrayals of madness in this article is best served by the redeployment of the term in Mad Studies, a recently established field of scholarship, theory, and activism deriving from the lived experiences of those who view themselves as mad, thus reclaiming the term in the same way that 'queer' has been redeployed as a term of identity and resistance. Alison Faulkner argues that Mad Studies is a project that "validat[es] and celebrat[es] survivor experiences and cultures and present[s] a multi-disciplinary and transformative challenge to biomedical psychiatry" (513). What is significant about Mad Studies is that it is a form of activism that attempts not only to spark conversations about the treatment of patients of madness, but also actively seeks transformation within the field of psychiatry. I use the term madness intentionally to analyse how the portrayal of madness in Lee's novel can comment on broader social issues in relation to gender and diaspora.

Diaspora literature has been recognised as a valuable lens for understanding diasporic experience precisely because it captures the nuanced, fluid nature of diasporic identities and social practices (Abebe, 56). While existing scholarship has examined the relationship between diaspora and mental health, particularly in relation to generational trauma, this body of work also includes analyses of identity formation in second-generation immigrants (Brubaker 5; Levitt and Waters, 17). This article contributes to that scholarship by examining how these forces operate in Lee's *Everything Here Is Beautiful* specifically. However, this existing scholarship has often neglected the role of gender in shaping diasporic experiences and their psychological consequences. Gender has been underrepresented in diaspora studies (Godin, 154), and where it does appear, the focus has been predominantly on women's experiences (Al-Ali, 39; Jolly and Reeves, 1). Male migrants have been rendered invisible in scholarship, cast either as patriarchal dominators or criminal threats rather than as structurally produced subjects. This lack of attention to gendered dimensions is also evident in broader migration scholarship, where Boyd and Grieco (n.p.) note the limited incorporation of gender into theoretical frameworks. This article attends to both a female and a male diasporic experience, and it is the intersection of these two gendered experiences that produces the conditions for Lucia's madness. Yet even this gendered approach has not fully accounted for the specific intersection of

illegal immigration status, masculine identity, and women's mental health. Scholars have examined diaspora and mental health, and scholars have examined gender and migration; however, the intersection of these factors in contemporary diaspora fiction has received limited critical attention. This article addresses this gap by demonstrating how Manny's undocumented status, and the structural inversion of power it produces, is not incidental to Lucia's madness but constitutive of it. Lee's novel is a particularly productive site for this analysis because it portrays these dynamics across multiple geographical contexts, allowing for a comparative reading of how geography itself produces the conditions for mental deterioration.

*Diaspora and identity formation*

An integral part of my investigation of Lucia's madness considers the connection between her identity formation, her madness, and her experience with the Chinese diaspora. The term 'diaspora' originated with the Jewish Diaspora, but over time has evolved to describe different forms of dispersion, and in a twenty-first century context, includes the realities of forced and voluntary migration today. While there are different understandings of what exactly 'diaspora' entails, for the purposes of this argument, I draw on Rogers Brubaker's definition, which is more inclusive and flexible than definitions set out by other theorists such as William Safran. In his definition, Brubaker provides three categories of diaspora: "The first is dispersion in space; the second, orientation to a 'homeland'; and the third, boundary-maintenance" (5). While more traditional views of diaspora emphasise the connection to a specific home country along with a desire to return to the homeland, Brubaker's definition does not necessarily require a planned or wished-for return to the homeland, or even a connection to a specific place. Instead, the retaining of a home culture and religion is more important than the link to a specific concrete place or country. This is significant in cases where, as in the case of the Bok family in the novel, a return to the home country is impossible, and thus never even considered. However, while a return may not be possible, the family still retains strong connections to their Chinese traditions and culture. In other words, even if there is some form of integration into the host society resulting in a dual identity — specifically in the case of second-generation immigrants — the diaspora can be maintained as long as the cultural and religious community still exists and thrives. The Bok family's visits to Chinatown and adherence to Chinese traditions align with Brubaker's 'boundary-maintenance,' demonstrating how diaspora is sustained through cultural practices rather than a physical homeland. Even though Lucia is born in the US, she is brought up in a Chinese household and as an adult, she still speaks "Chinese, [she cooks] Chinese food, practice tai-chi on occasion and drink oolong tea" (Lee, 166). However, as I will show, the retaining of this connection to a homeland can have a significant impact on the identity formation of second-generation immigrants like Lucia. Because she is born in the US, she does not experience the trauma of leaving their home country and settle in a new one like her mother and sister. However,

she is the recipient of her family's trauma, often referred to as generational or historical trauma. As Strassner and Calnan write, "research shows that children are impacted even before birth by trauma that is experienced by their mothers" (325). Moreover, Lucia does not only inherit her family's trauma but grows up having to negotiate the Chinese values and traditions of her home with the more liberal American culture of her birthplace. In fact, while she retains a connection to her culture, she does not understand being seen as purely Chinese, wondering: "I'm human first, aren't I? Aren't we all?" (Lee, 166). It is this difficulty in reconciling seemingly opposing cultural identities that contribute to the decline in her mental health.

*Gender and migration*

My main argument focuses on the gender roles and how these intersect with the experiences of migrants. However, despite high numbers of women migrating, both voluntarily and involuntarily, research on female migrants is still very limited in comparison to research conducted on male migrants. According to Marie Godin, because "gender was [only] treated as an appendix in the field of diaspora studies", it means that "for a very long time, social heterogeneities within diasporas formation were overlooked and theoretical accounts were mainly told in genderless ways" (154). In their report on incorporating gender into international migration theory, Monica Boyd and Elizabeth Grieco agree that for the last quarter of the twentieth century there has been little concerted effort to incorporate gender into theories of international migration. Yet, understanding gender is critical in the migration context" (n.p.). Nadje Al-Ali writes that the determining factors behind decisions to migrate, such as war, do not affect men and women in the same ways. Significantly, she writes that gender — which is a "social and cultural construction of what it means to be a man and a woman — also comes into play during the flight from a war-torn country, the upheavals of migration and settling in a new environment" (39). Al-Ali also points to the notion that gender is constructed by societal and cultural notions about men and women, which is an important factor to consider in men and women's differing experiences not only of life, but of migration and diaspora (39). Furthermore, migration may "also entrench traditional roles and inequalities and expose women to new vulnerabilities as the result of precarious legal status, exclusion and isolation" (Jolly and Reeves, 1). As we will see in my analysis of Lucia and Manny's relationship and the shifting gender roles, the novel portrays two gendered experiences of diaspora, which are intertwined by what Manny's diasporic position enables or constrains and how these impact Lucia's agency and lack of agency.

*Illegal immigration, fictive kinship, and masculinity*

While Lucia's mental health is shaped by her experiences within the Chinese diaspora in the US, Manny's identity as a man is shaped by his undocumented status in the US. In relation to this, my analysis will consider two aspects. Firstly,

I consider the ways in which Manny forms connections with other undocumented immigrants, entering into 'fictive kinship'. After Lucia falls pregnant with their daughter Essy, she moves into the house that Manny shares with other undocumented migrants. These migrants come from different countries and are in the US for varying reasons, coming together because of what they have in common. Due to their undocumented status, they form a type of community where little personal information may be shared, but where they watch out for one another, becoming a kind of substitute family. In my exploration of this, I draw on the work of Carol Stack (1974), who coined the term 'fictive kin' to describe how families in conditions of poverty adapt by forming large supportive networks. In her article on undocumented restaurant workers in the US, Esther Kim (2009) applies the term 'fictive kinship' in explaining how these workers create social cohesion, which serves as a source of solidarity and identification for individuals who are otherwise pushed to the periphery by the dominant society, and that despite their illegal status and low earnings, this group of undocumented workers is able to maintain their dignity, find joy, and attain a sense of belonging through integration into a pseudo-family structure. I use this same understanding of the term to analyse how Manny relies on the household of undocumented immigrants as a substitute for a real family in the US. Secondly, and more importantly, I analyse how Manny's illegal status impacts his masculinity and, by extension, how this contributes to Lucia's mental health. In this analysis, I look to Raewyn W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity as a context-dependent configuration of practice rather than a fixed type. In other words, different masculinities can be arranged in hierarchies, and hegemonic masculinity is distinguished from marginalised masculinity, which "share many characteristics of hegemonic masculinity but are also structurally marginalized due to race, class, or nationality", or, in the case of Manny, documentation status (Silva, 1). Drawing on this theory, I will consider the geography of masculinity and how what counts as dominant or subordinate masculine practices can shift across local, regional, and global contexts. Lastly, I examine how these structural reconfigurations of Manny's masculine position produce the conditions for Lucia's mental health to thrive or deteriorate.

*Geography and gender dynamics*

While my analysis focuses on how Manny's masculine positions impact Lucia's madness, it is necessary to consider the full context of Lucia's madness, as some of her episodes occur before she meets Manny. The novel portrays the incompatibility between the liberal American culture and the more traditional Chinese culture as one of the main factors contributing to Lucia's mental deterioration. This incompatibility is portrayed through Lucia's relationship with her mother. When adults migrate to a new country, especially when they move from a conservative country to a Western country with more liberal societies, they usually try to maintain their cultural practices and values within the home and attempt to raise their children with those values. According to Peggy Levitt,

this becomes much easier when large groups of the same country or culture migrate, since "they organize themselves transnationally […] thereby enabling migrants to meet most of their needs" (134). The sisters often visit Chinatown to buy Chinese food such as "taro milk tea" (Lee, 188). However, because the children are often more exposed to the more liberal society through school, extracurricular activities, and new friends, they may struggle to accept the values of their home culture, which can result in a clash between the parents and the children. Levitt and Waters refer to this type of assimilation as a "'straight-line' model of assimilation [… where] the second generation learns an immigrant culture at home but encounters the more highly valued American native culture in school, among their peer groups, and from the mass media" (15). Such assimilation could result in tension between the generations but they are then ultimately able to forge "an ethnic culture that combines the American and immigrant social systems" (Levitt and Waters, 15). In the novel, Lucia is portrayed as a free, American spirit, which their mother attributes to a lack of memories of China and suffering. In her narration, Miranda states: "Our mother always said Lucia was different — restless, wild, born on American soil" (Lee, 33). As an American, Lucia has the freedom her mother was searching for when leaving China, yet her mother does not entirely approve of the effects this has on her daughter. When Lucia asked if her mother was happy staying with her father after he had shamed the family, her mother answers, "Happy? Aiya, Xiao-mei, you want too much, don't be greedy. This is too much American" (Lee, 186). While Lucia protests that their mother came to the US to be an American, this shows the differences in their views. Their mother views the need for happiness in a relationship as greedy. Instead, she seems to value hard work and survival as more important than happiness, while Lucia struggles to accept the clash between her American identity and the expectations for her mother.

While Lucia is portrayed as a free spirit, she struggles to accept the clash between her American identity and the expectations of her mother. When she, having spent time working in South American countries, is asked by a potential employer why she has spent so much time there, Lucia is confused:

> But what would it be, I wonder, to conduct one's life as a Chinese life instead of just a life? I speak Chinese, I cook Chinese food, practice tai-chi on occasion and drink oolong tea, but to flaunt one's authenticity seems terribly gauche. I'm human first, aren't I? Aren't we all? (Lee, 165)

For Lucia, then, the expectation that she must "flaunt [her] authenticity" is problematic, and she questions the focus on identifying according to specific cultures. In addition, she rejects the idea of cultures being exclusive, arguing that her identity as a human being should be more important than the cultural skills that she possesses or her race or culture. However, she must still contend with society's tendency to categorise people according to their cultures, which results in people being treated unfairly. For the employer, her interest in South American cultures means she is not Chinese enough, yet her mother constantly laments that she is too American; even when she dreams of her mother, she is told that she is too American (Lee, 248). Lucia displays intimate knowledge of her own culture

and her ability to speak Chinese, but her identity as an American means that she can never fully claim her Chinese heritage. Even though she is a second-generation immigrant, and she is portrayed as struggling with the seemingly opposing Chinese and American identities, her madness — variously diagnosed as Schizophrenia, Schizoaffective Disorder, and Bipolar with psychotic features — is illustrated as the result of stressful or important moments in her life (Lee, 101). According to Hooley, Woodberry, and Ferriter, while Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder are biologically based, they "appear to be forms of pathology that are best understood within the context of a diathesis-stress (or vulnerability-stress) model" (205). In other words, environmental factors can also be considered in examinations of the disorders since external factors such as stress or abuse may contribute or exacerbate the symptoms. When Lucia's first mental breakdown occurs after finishing graduate school, one doctor tells Miranda that "such episodes could be triggered by stress, or drugs, or trauma, or exhaustion. Or sometimes, nothing at all" (Lee, 20). Since disorders such as Schizophrenia are biological in nature, this could be the case, but the novel does suggest that stress plays a role in Lucia's mental state since the psychotic breakdowns presented all occur in conjunction with significant events in her life.

Lucia's worst episode occurs after the birth of her baby, Essy, whom she shares with Manny. In Manny's description of Lucia's madness, she is presented as a danger to Essy. At first there are signs that Lucia is not mentally well, which gradually worsen to the point of what can be viewed as madness. Manny does not know about Lucia's past experiences with madness and thus does not understand what is happening, believing that she is simply a bad mother. However, this description illustrates signs of Schizophrenia since she is not only paranoid, but experiences hallucinations too. More alarming to Manny is the fact that Lucia stops touching her baby. This results in Essy cutting herself with her too-long nails that Lucia has not cut, as well as having to stay in her dirty diaper for too long. The evidence that Manny provides paints Lucia as a mother who is neglecting her child which, according to societal standards, is unacceptable. According to conventional gender expectations, women are automatically supposed to be caring and nurturing, as well as good at mothering. Thus, when mothers struggle to connect with their children or display the kind of neglect seen in Lucia's behaviour, they are viewed as defective and abnormal. However, it is one of their housemates, Susi, who reveals that Lucia's seeming neglect of Essy may be due to something more profound than simply being a bad mother:

> Susi said this happened to women sometimes. 'Postpartum depression,' she said. She was proud to use these words. 'How would you know?' I asked. 'She has a hole inside her. Gigante. Where the baby used to be. Boom, bam.' She clapped loudly. 'You think a body can take this, like it's nothing? How can a woman be fine like this?' (Lee, 72)

While this is not a formal diagnosis, Susi's description points to the trauma of childbirth, and how the physical separation can affect new mothers. According to Sword et al., "childbirth is a complex life event associated with numerous biological, familial and social changes, [and thus] it may trigger psychiatric mood disturbances in women with predisposing genetic or psychosocial

vulnerabilities" (51). In addition to having to navigate life as a new mother, Lucia has to do so in a specific diasporic context, without the usual support structures that could have aided her. Her mother has passed, her relationship with her sister is strained, and she lives in a household with undocumented immigrants and a partner who does not understand her history of mental illness. It is, therefore, no surprise that the event would affect Lucia's mental well-being. However, because of the general expectation that women should become mothers, there is also the expectation that women would do well during childbirth and would naturally excel at motherhood. Thus, when women such as Lucia struggle with their mental health, resulting in the neglect of their babies, they are viewed as unnatural or crazy. However, as Habel et al. write, when new mothers' "sense of themselves as women and as mothers [falls] short of societal expectations, this [has] a negative effect on their psychological well-being" (731). While Susi uses the term for this — 'postpartum depression' — Lucia's symptoms point to postpartum psychosis, a more severe form of postpartum depression. Postpartum psychosis is also more dangerous since it "can develop rapidly and place the life of mother and infant in danger related to its symptoms which may include delusions, hallucinations, severe mood symptoms and cognitive symptoms" (Friedman, Reed and Ross, 65). Because Lucia's hallucinations result in Essy hurting herself with her too-long fingernails and being in danger of infection as a result of Lucia's neglect, her madness can be classified as psychosis instead of simply depression. The episode underscores how Lucia's madness is not simply a medical condition, but shaped by the impossible demands of migration and motherhood.

Susi's explanation provides the reader with some sympathy for Lucia, but it is only in her own narrative that the reader can gain an understanding of her madness and her behaviour as a result of this postpartum psychosis. Since she has experienced psychotic breakdowns before, she would have been on medication, but when she is newly pregnant with Essy, she decides to give up her medication (Lee, 181). She would live her life, believing that she would have "forty week's truce — peace, the serpents in hibernation" (Lee, 181). These serpents are snakes who, according to Lucia, live in her head and whose job it is "to warn [her] of the dangers of motherhood" (Lee, 149). Serpents are often associated with evil and are seen as messengers of the supposed tragedy that will befall Essy if Lucia touches her more than twelve times. Significant about the presence of serpents is the connection to Lucia's cultural heritage. According to Denise Chao, Chinese mythology "abounds with stories of snakes" (193) and, contrary to Western beliefs associating snakes with evil, "Chinese people deemed it a symbol of good luck and prosperity" (199). Consequently, Lucia would not only follow the serpents' direction because she may fear for Essy's life, but also because of the associations of good luck. In addition, it is significant that there are always two snakes who "spoke in opposite voices. If one was soft, the other was loud; if one politely reminded me to keep my hands to myself, the other said I deserved to have my arms lopped off" (149). The serpents are not merely a symptom of Lucia's psychosis but are also portrayed as a manifestation of the inherited cultural memory that her mother's migration brought into her

life. Thus, the choice of serpents in deliberate, illustrating the generational trauma that contributes to Lucia's madness. In the opposition seen in the image of the serpents, the theme of doubleness is present, while the juxtaposition between their voices point to the Chinese philosophical concept of yin and yang. The symbol for yin and yang is well-known, as are its associations with balance — usually the balance between good and evil, or dark and light, represented by the black and white teardrops of the symbol. However, according to Chinese cosmogeny, the symbol represents "human beings liv[ing] between heaven and earth and at the intersection of yin and yang" (Wang, 2). Thus, the association with balance comes from the notion that humans must "stay centered between heaven and earth and to maintain appropriate relations between yin and yang" (Wang, 2). The serpents then are interconnected but opposing forces, suggesting these notions of balance and harmony. The doubleness of these opposing forces also embodies the doubleness of Lucia's identity, and the struggles in negotiating Chinese and American culture. While Lucia is portrayed as assimilating into the US most easily and as the one least affected by the trauma of the family's migration, the trauma of the migration and her connection to Chinese culture are shown in her madness. While Lucia herself does not experience migration, and thus the trauma of migrating, she is nevertheless the recipient of her family's trauma, often referred to as generational trauma or historical trauma where trauma is handed down to generations who did not directly experience the specific events. In addition, "research shows that children are impacted even before birth by trauma that is experienced by their mothers" (Straussner and Calnan, 325). Thus, the Chinese symbols present in Lucia's madness illustrate that she bears the generational trauma handed down from her mother who arguably suffered the most in coming to the US since she lost her husband, had to migrate alone as a pregnant woman with a child, and eventually died of lung cancer. While Lucia's madness has a biological foundation, the novel also illustrates how it is triggered by specific environmental factors such as her relationship with Manny.

In addition to Manny's feelings of responsibility for Lucia's well-being and their daughter's safety, he must contend with his precarious position of being an undocumented immigrant. Manny, who is originally from Ecuador, immigrated to the US alone to make money to send back home. Because of the lack of biological family, he becomes part of a community of illegal immigrants, who live together and watch out for one another. This can be seen in the living situation of Lucia's partner, Manny, where eleven people who are unrelated live together, calling themselves "Vargas. [They] said [they] were cousins. It made [them] feel safe" (Lee, 46). This suggests that in lieu of a real family, the illegal immigrants stick together, taking care of one another and becoming a family. This household exemplifies the term 'fictive kinship', since the Vargas family employs this survival strategy in forming a substitute family to navigate the vulnerability that comes with being undocumented. For Manny, this substitute family provides emotional support but also reinforces his marginalised masculinity, as he lacks the authority of a traditional patriarch. While this kind of support structure is vital for their survival, there is still danger, since if any of

them are deported, the others are vulnerable to getting caught themselves. As a result, Manny is careful in everything he does, such as always starting the engine before driving, checking "the signal and lights [… driving at] exactly the speed limit, no more, no less" (Lee, 84). The risk of getting deported not only affects Manny's behaviour, but his ability to assert himself and his masculinity, which is evident in the way he carries himself and how he treats Lucia. Lucia's description of their meeting reveals that he seems to be fragile, and that because of the "way he stood in public, not quite raised to full height, hands in his pockets, downcast eyes, [she] knew he was an illegal" (Lee, 145). His entire demeanour suggests that when he is in public, Manny tries to be as small as possible, avoiding drawing any attention to himself. In addition, he is so afraid of getting caught that when he accidentally slices his hand open at work, he refuses to go to the hospital; instead, his boss wraps his hand as best as he can (Lee, 52). Their relationship in the US portrays a delicate equilibrium where Lucia's citizenship grants her with freedom and agency while Manny's undocumented status results in their relationship being precarious and at risk of collapsing under the weight of external forces such as the threat of deportation. By attempting to physically shrink himself, Manny is not simply expressing fear but enacting a structurally produced masculinity based on his fragile and vulnerable position in society. Connell and Messerschmidt argue that hegemonic masculinity involves "particular ways of representing and using men's bodies" and that bodies "participate in social action by delineating courses of social conduct" (851). Thus, Manny's physical bearing is an embodied manifestation of a marginalised masculinity which is under structural threat. Through his fear of being deported, Manny's body language represents the structural conditions of his legal status and, ironically, makes his undocumented status visible in his very posture.

While the novel does not delve into the effects that this type of migration has on Manny's own mental health, it does reveal the sense of freedom that comes with legal immigration. Speaking of Lucia, Manny says that she is "confident she could get whatever she wanted. [Manny] supposed this was part of being American" (Lee, 52). In other words, because she is in America legally, she has nothing to fear when it comes to demanding what she wants, whereas he must always be careful. Even more significant about the power dynamics in their relationship than the contrast in their experiences of feelings is Manny's precarious state within the relationship itself. Since Manny and Lucia have a child together, getting married — thus granting Manny a green card — is a logical solution to his fears of getting deported. However, during a conversation where Lucia probes how Manny is feeling, he does not answer: "He just looks at me with his dog brown eyes. But he doesn't bring up what I think he's going to bring up—the papers. So I don't either. It's awkward, complicated, and the truth is, I don't want to get married again, not like this, anyway" (Lee, 173). The comparison to puppy eyes in referring to his "dog brown eyes" reinforce the reversal of gender dynamics. Through Lucia's perception of Manny, he is placed in a visually supplicant and vulnerable position, while she inhabits the space of authority. This places a deliberate tension with the conventional expectation of

male dominance in a relationship. She is the one with agency, while he is dependent on her. This reversal of gender roles is emphasised when Lucia continues with her narration, stating: "But for Manny, well, it occurs to me that maybe there's one thing he's more scared of than getting deported—me" (Lee, 173). Thus, Manny feels such powerlessness in the relationship that he would rather live with the threat of deportation than risk upsetting Lucia, giving her total control over their relationship. Manny confirms this in his narration of Lucia's postpartum breakdown, stating that he "couldn't understand what was happening inside her head", resulting in him feeling as though he is "in control of nothing" (Lee, 74). Manny's feeling of powerlessness is based on two elements then: His fear of being deported as well as his fear of Lucia's mental instability. He is afraid to challenge Lucia because she holds power over his immigration status and because he does not know what could trigger Lucia's psychosis, putting not only him, but also their daughter at risk. This structural lack of autonomy is what produces Lucia's relative agency, creating a fragile inversion of gender dynamics. However, this powerlessness is not permanent but contingent on geography and is thus susceptible to reversal.

The importance of the geographic location in relation to Manny's masculine position is further emphasised when the couple decides to move to Ecuador, where Manny is from. Connell and Messerschmidt argue that "regional and local constructions of hegemonic masculinity are shaped by the articulation of these gender systems with global processes" (849). In the novel, this is illustrated in how Manny's masculinity is produced differently by the local gender order of the US, where he is constrained by his undocumented status, and the regional gender order of Ecuador, where he is a local man, not only free from the threat of deportation but also operating within much more conservative patriarchal norms. Whereas he is careful and vulnerable in the United States, his freedom in Ecuador means he can relax, resulting in a shift in the gender and power structures in his relationship with Lucia which, in turn, affects her mental health. At first, the freedom Manny experiences has a positive effect on their relationship. Lucia states that Manny is "confident in a way she has never seen before — the way his shoulders sit back, how he walks with a slight swagger, and for a while, this renews her sexual appetite" (Lee, 212). This suggests that the fear that comes with being an illegal immigrant affects his masculinity, which can be seen when Lucia, who viewed him as one of the 'boys' in the US, thinks of him as a "full-grown man, not a guy, a *novio*, one of the Vargas boys" (Lee, 212, original italics). The distinction made between 'boys' and 'man' indicates the importance of masculinity and the way in which he can assert this now that he is no longer in danger of being deported. In their discussion on migrant men, Katherine Charsley and Helena Wray argue that these migrant men may attempt to "recoup or redefine a desirable masculine identity in the face of constraints or disappointments" (407). This is precisely what Manny does in his liberation from the suppression of his masculinity in the US. However, while this can be viewed as a positive form of freedom for him, it results in Lucia's freedom slowly diminishing. Thus, his liberation simultaneously results in oppression for Lucia. This can also be attributed to the more conservative views regarding gender roles

and expectations in Ecuador. Here, women are expected to perform household chores such as cooking and cleaning, while men act as breadwinners. Manny's mother, for example, almost never stops cooking; when Lucia asks her what her plans are after lunch, she states that she will begin preparing dinner. Her days consist of "cooking, cleaning, harvesting fruits and vegetables from the earth. She has nowhere else to be, nothing else to achieve, only chore after chore after chore" (Lee, 209). When Manny, Lucia and Essy move into their own little house, Lucia must take care of these chores too, while she is also expected to have more children. Manny's female family members try to convince Lucia that Essy will be lonely as an only child, with his mother saying it "would be a shame not to have another" (Lee, 209). To them, this is the main role of women in society, and they believe that not fulfilling that role is a waste. Lucia, who does not want more children, feels this burden, noting that in most societies, women's identities are defined by their ability or willingness to have children because it always comes back to "this. Among women, always this" (Lee, 209). However, these expectations begin to weigh on Lucia's mind, affecting her happiness and, in turn, her ability to care for her mental health.

When Lucia becomes tired of her days being filled only with chores, she suggests to Manny that they move to town and open a laundromat. Part of her duties has been to wash their clothes in the river along with the other village women. Since she and Manny spoke about the possibility of opening a business in Ecuador before moving, she believes it would do her good, while also helping women save time by providing "a laundry service once a week" (Lee, 212). Manny's reaction illustrates how ingrained conservative ideals regarding gender roles are. Instead of having concerns about the viability of such an endeavour, he dismisses her idea by asking, "But what would the women do?" (Lee, 212). In other words, he believes that it is necessary for the women to have chores to do, and, without them, they would be bored. Manny's dismissal of Lucia can be connected to Connell and Messerschmidt's concept of "protest masculinity", where marginalised men claim "the power typical of hegemonic masculinities" even while they may lack "the economic resources and institutional authority that underpins the regional and global patterns" (847-848). Thus, Manny's reassertion of power over Lucia, denying her a form of agency, can be read as form of masculine reclamation after years of suppression. For Lucia, who has always valued and loved her work, Manny's response seems beyond comprehension. As a result, Lucia decides to move into the town for a few days every week by herself to do some work as a writer. While this decision is important for Lucia's mental health, the societal values of conservative Ecuador mean that this behaviour is frowned upon, drawing disapproval from Manny's family. Manny's mother asks her, "Why do you go, to be away from your family, your child?" (Lee, 234). Since women are valued as caregivers whose job is to be in the home, they view Lucia's wish to work as unnatural, specifically because it takes her away from her child. While it is not said outright, Manny's mother implies that Lucia is a bad mother. In addition, there is the suggestion that she should conform to the specific society in which she currently resides. When she explains that she was a news reporter in America, where she studied journalism,

an aunt replies that “this is not America”, while another insists that “Esperanza must miss [Lucia]” (Lee, 235). This points to one of the difficulties faced by immigrants; in order to be accepted in a certain society, you need to conform to that specific society’s values and expectations, no matter what you may have done in your home country. Usually, those within diasporas in the US and other Western countries struggle to adapt to the more liberal values and expectations. However, for Lucia, it is the other way around and she finds herself trapped in a place where she is unable to do the things she enjoys. Because the family disapproves, she withdraws from them, spending more and more time in the town, until her mental health begins to falter. She attempts to hatch a plan to take Essy and return to America without Manny’s knowledge, but once again finds herself trapped due to the country’s laws since she would need Manny to sign Essy’s exit papers for her to leave Ecuador (Lee, 254). This results in her panicking, becoming dizzy and feeling as though “each of her body’s limbs seems to have its own mind. She needs a plan. A scheme. She sees how it is, this scheme against women, to make a woman ask a man for permission to go somewhere with her own blood-child” (Lee, 254). In other words, the gender inequality in Ecuador, and the importance society places on the male as the head of the family, means that even though Essy is a US citizen, Lucia cannot take her anywhere without Manny’s approval.

Without any recourse to free herself, Lucia seems to give up, resigning from her job and returning to the village. The effects on her psychological well-being can be seen through her changes in demeanour. Manny notices the difference in her, but notes that it is “not in that erratic way she had been for months. This was something more fragile, more volatile” (Lee, 277). Instead of experiencing the symptoms of Schizophrenia, these are the symptoms of a woman who has given up on her independence and has resigned herself to the life expected of her in the conservative Ecuadorian society. The result, however, is that Lucia does become more erratic, hiding in the outhouse from supposed spies, and hurling boiling water at Manny when he suggests calling her sister for advice (Lee, 280-281). While it is unclear whether Lucia is taking her medication or not, her erratic and paranoid behaviour suggests that she is not taking care of her mental health. Significantly, however, this comments on the importance of work fulfilment to psychological well-being. The novel suggests that Lucia’s denial of a career removes her incentive for self-care. It has been established that job satisfaction can improve mental health, especially when the work is meaningful too. The strongest evidence for this can be found in the decline of hysteria diagnoses in women during the second world war; because men were away from home, many women took over their jobs, resulting in fewer women being hospitalised with nervous disorders or mental health problems. Allan et al. note that for mental health to improve, both job satisfaction and meaningful work are important in order “to lower anxiety and stress” (42). Thus, as Elaine Showalter argues, women are less prone to psychological breakdown “when they are given meaningful work” (195). The implication is that while women may find satisfaction within the family, for many women motherhood alone is not meaningful enough and, like Lucia, without meaningful work, their mental

health deteriorates. In the novel, then, it is precisely because of the denial of independence and agency that Lucia experiences another mental breakdown, leaving her to make an impossible decision for her survival.

Lucia's only recourse is to make the difficult decision to leave Essy behind and return to the US without her, a decision she makes when she finds out her ex-husband, Yonah, is dying of cancer, and she returns to take care of him. The difficulty in this decision is made clear in Lucia's attempts to take Essy with her earlier in the novel, where she contemplates leaving Manny and realises that she cannot do so without her daughter: "For a mother to leave a child, it's impossible. She cannot leave Essy behind" (Lee, 253). To then ultimately do so without Essy shows the internal conflict Lucia feels about the situation. She does not abandon her daughter without feeling the guilt, yet for her own mental health, it is the only thing she can do. Significantly, however, the novel does not give the reader access to Lucia's decision-making process since this section is narrated by Manny, who is simply told by Lucia that she is going to the US to help take care of her "friend" (Lee, 311). However, the portrayal of Lucia taking care of Yonah in his last days emphasises the necessity of this decision for her mental health. Even though her role as caretaker of Yonah is similar to those of a housewife, Lucia finds meaning in taking care of him, making sure he is comfortable during the last days of his life. Instead of feeling as though her wings are clipped by the duties of a housewife, or the gendered expectations of conservative societies, Lucia feels useful, taking charge of Yonah's routine, and making sure he is comfortable. The hospice nurse attests "to [Lucia's] diligence, the tenderness with which she tucked [Yonah's] blanket around his feet, brought ice chips to his lips, gently lifted his head from his pillow as she mopped the back of his neck with a cool washcloth" (Lee, 333). In addition to Lucia's feeling of usefulness, her partial recovery can also be attributed to the removal of the structural conditions that produced her deterioration in Ecuador. Silva's argument that masculine identities change as immigrants experience new contexts works in reverse here; back in the US, the conditions that enabled Manny's reassertion of masculine authority over Lucia no longer apply, and her agency is restored as a result. Significant to note here, is that in taking care of Yonah, Lucia embodies the gendered roles which she resisted when they were imposed on her by Manny's family. As Naomi Gerstel writes, "caregiving remains women's work far more than men's" (475). This implies that caregiving roles such as nursing are occupied mainly by women. A further implication is that when family members need care, it falls to women to provide this assistance. However, the novel subverts the idea that traditional gendered roles are inherently oppressive to women by showing Lucia finding fulfilment in caring for Yonah. This is because — in contrast to her experiences in Ecuador, where her agency is removed by the patriarchal structures — here, she has full control over her life, and she *chooses* to care for her ex-husband. Even Lucia's death, which occurs after Yonah has died, is not presented as the tragic result of her madness. Instead, Lucia stays behind in Yonah's house in Minnesota, packing up his things even after his children have left when, one night, she ventures out in a snowstorm and freezes to death. When she is found between the trunks of two maple trees the

next day — described in one of the few chapters narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator — she looks "peaceful there, curled in that spot, as if she's squeezed herself into a place of safety" (Lee, 336). However, because the reader is not given access to Lucia's version of events, since the narration does not include a description of her actual death, there is no knowing whether it is grief or madness that propelled her out into the night. This is emphasised by the fact that, as the narrator says, it is "impossible to know the truth of another's interior life" (Lee, 336). While the novel suggests that Lucia's agency has been restored in her return to the US, the lack of narration from her point of view and the emphasis on the unknowability of her inner thoughts on the day of her death does complicate this somewhat. While the analysis shows a clear correlation between her geographic location and her mental health, the ambiguity of her death also reinforces the nuances of her madness and even challenges the idea that geography alone determines her well-being. However, the unknowability of Lucia's death does not undermine the novel's portrayal of geography as a contributing factor to her madness. Rather, the ambiguity emphasises that madness cannot be reduced to any single cause.

*Conclusion*

Through Lucia and Manny's relationship, Mira T. Lee illustrates how madness is not a fixed state but a relational one, shaped by the geographies of power that govern immigration, gender, and mental health. In the portrayal of the gender dynamics between the two, first in the US, and then how it shifts when they relocate to Ecuador, the novel shows how geographic locations can inhibit masculinity on one hand, and suppress agency, on the other. Manny's precarious station in the US means that he is unable to assert his masculinity, while his fear of Lucia's madness renders him powerless in the relationship. In Ecuador, however, the roles are reversed and Manny, no longer threatened by the authorities, is able to assert himself as a man in a traditional patriarchal society, while Lucia's agency is suppressed by the traditional views and expectations of her, along with the loss of agency that comes with being unable to take her daughter Essy out of the country without Manny's permission. Thus, Lucia's madness, while not inherently caused by geographic locations, is shown to be exacerbated or alleviated by the structural inequalities she navigates as a woman and as a migrant. In addition, Manny's experience aligns with Connell and Messerschmidt's theory of hegemonic masculinity as context-dependent. In the US, his undocumented status relegates him to a marginalised masculinity, while in Ecuador, he performs a protest masculinity that reasserts dominance over Lucia. This demonstrates how immigration does not just displace bodies but also reconfigures gendered identities, with profound consequences for mental health. Lucia's final act —venturing into a snowstorm after having regained her agency by choosing to leave Essy and Manny in Ecuador to care for her dying ex-husband — resists easy interpretation. However, it underscores the main argument of this article, that madness and freedom are never purely individual but are always intertwined with the geographies of power that shape life. Lee's

work thus contributes to a growing body of diaspora literature that demands we recognise the systemic forces that impact the mental health and identity formation of migrants. In the end, Lucia is found "peaceful there, curled in that spot" (Lee, 336). Ultimately, *Everything Here Is Beautiful* challenges the reader to confront uncomfortable truths about madness, gender, and migration: The migrant's madness is not a private affliction but something produced at the intersection of immigration status, gender expectations, and the structural inequalities that determine who has agency and who does not.

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